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SUBJECT: CPV EXTERNAL RELATIONS CHIEF MEETS AMBASSADOR

Ref: A. 02 Hanoi 1022 B. Hanoi 1805

1. (U) Summary: The CPV's top foreign affairs official told the Ambassador he wants better relations and "understanding" with the U.S., and that Vietnam would continue dialogue with the U.S. on human rights and "democracy." He also said Vietnam would participate in the rebuilding of Iraq "according to its capability and tradition" and that Vietnam was focused on improving its legal system. End summary.

2. (U) Ambassador, accompanied by poloff, met on September 23 with Nguyen Van Son, Chairman of the Commission for External Relations of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Vietnam. (Ref a reported on Ambassador's introductory call.) Son was joined by Pham Tien Nhien, Director of the Commission's Europe and Americas Department and by Bui The Giang, Director of the Commission's People-to-People Committee. [Note: Giang will be the senior representative of the CPV in Vietnam's delegation to the Conference on U.S.-Vietnam relations in Washington next week. End note.]

Bilateral relations: good news. . .

3. (U) Ambassador reviewed recent positive developments in the U.S.-Vietnam relationship, including upcoming high-level visits, and noted that since strategic decisions in Vietnam are by definition the decisions of the Party, Son's insights into the SRV's thinking would be valuable to the USG. Ambassador noted that Vietnam's continued integration into the world economy was critical to its success, and that Vietnam had clearly made a decision to improve its relations with other countries, including the U.S. Son agreed that Vietnam attached great importance to its relationship with the U.S., expressed satisfaction at the Ambassador's positive evaluation of new developments, and wished him a safe trip when he accompanied Foreign Minister Nien to Washington at the end of the month.

4. (U) Ambassador recommended to Son that CPV leaders also visit the U.S. in order to see the U.S. system and meet American people. The roles of various pressure groups in the United States, he said, were poorly understood in Vietnam, and CPV leaders could profit from seeing and meeting with businesses, labor unions, ethnic groups, and professional associations. Ambassador recognized that the Commission's role was advisory, but stressed that visiting the USG and meeting with Congress and interest groups would provide a greater understanding of what really goes on in the United States and improve the quality of the Commission's recommendations. In particular, he added, young people with bright futures should have the chance to go to the U.S. to broaden their contacts and understanding. Ambassador urged also that CPV officials meet with visiting U.S. groups in order to make the CPV seem less mysterious. Son thanked the Ambassador for his ideas and suggestions and pledged to respond as soon as possible.

. . . and bad news

5. (U) Ambassador warned that human rights and religious freedom issues "hang over the relationship like a dark cloud." He observed that while both sides were working to move the relationship forward, lack of progress in those areas slowed progress. Son said he thought the conflicts over human rights and religious freedom were in part due to a lack of mutual understanding, and expressed hope that the Ambassador would help others in the U.S. understand Vietnam more clearly. In Son's opinion, there should be more regular contact between the Embassy and "us." [Note: It was ambiguous whether Son meant with the CPV, the Commission, or the Central Committee. End note] Son claimed that Vietnam wanted to continue the dialogue on human rights and "democracy" and expressed a hope that, through the Ambassador, the American people could understand Vietnam better and build mutual trust.

6. (U) Ambassador noted that the key to increasing mutual awareness was interaction in different spheres, including cultural and educational exchanges. The U.S. had been trying to increase those activities, but had run into some problems with provincial authorities, most recently during

the Jazz Ambassadors' tour, he said. Son admitted that the provinces sometimes "didn't get the message," and that blocking the performance of a music group did not make sense.

17. (U) Both the Ambassador and Son lamented the public comment in each other's press. Ambassador stated that it seemed that the editorials in the Vietnamese press, while still harsh, had gotten somewhat better. Son likewise complained about editorials in the U.S. press, adding that American papers published "hurtful things" that he did not care to repeat.

18. (U) Ambassador also expressed regret that bilateral cooperation in certain areas -- particularly law enforcement -- was still very slow; the result was a reduction in the effectiveness of U.S. and Vietnamese agencies. Son acknowledged Ambassador's concerns but did not offer a response.

International and other issues

19. (U) When asked about the most recent Party plenum on national security strategy in June (ref b), Son claimed that there had been no discussion of Iraq. He stated that Vietnam had "its own attitude" about Iraq, and did not follow any other country's lead. Son emphasized that Vietnam was nonetheless prepared to participate in the effort to help Iraq and would "work in line with Vietnam's abilities and traditions." Son added that this attitude was "intended to be cooperative and positive" and that Vietnam's international activities were designed to "further international relations and forge a proactive effort to achieve Vietnam's needs and accelerate national economic development." Considering Vietnam's particular expertise, Ambassador suggested that Vietnam explore an international peacekeeping role, perhaps with a focus on demining.

10. (U) Son reminded Ambassador that he was also a delegate to the National Assembly and that Vietnam needed a better, more complete legal system, which would ensure equality on many fronts. He lamented the slow pace of reform in the Vietnamese system, admitting that the GVN was "slow to learn" from other governments but was highly concerned with both quality and popular opinion in drafting and passing new legislation.

11. (U) Comment: Our efforts to elevate the substance of strategic dialogue with the CPV's top foreign policy expert were not notably successful. Son appeared to be unwilling to deviate from predictable -- if generally positive -- lines. However, the Commission's staff has been quietly helpful in recent months in arranging meetings for Ambassador with General Secretary Nong Duc Manh and Politburo member Tran Dinh Hoan, as well as other meetings with various CPV Commissions for Pol/C, further indicating a renewed willingness to engage in dialogue and expand contacts. It will nonetheless likely take years of increased dialogue before we reach the level of strategic interchange more common with our other Asian diplomatic partners.
BURGHARDT